



Ring-Necked Pheasant



Photo Courtesy of South Dakota Game Fish and Parks

Introduction

The Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) is a popular gamebird found throughout much of the United States. This easily distinguishable, chicken-like bird is highly prized by upland hunters each fall. Not native to North America, various strains of pheasant were introduced going back to the 18th century. Indiana became involved in pheasant stocking around 1900, and the wild pheasants that we have today are the descendants of decades of experimental releases. Our Hoosier pheasants are of primarily Chinese descent.

General Characteristics

The pheasant is a great example of sexual dimorphism. Males, or cock birds, are gaudy in colorization, with copper and bronze colored breast feathers, iridescent green and violet colored head feathers, and bright red eye patches. A lengthy group of tail feathers are usually also present. The females, or hens, are drab brown in color. Cocks are larger than hens, weighing 4 to 5 pounds, as opposed to the hens, which are commonly 2 ½ to 3 pounds.

Family Life

The ring-necked pheasant is polygamous, meaning one cock bird will service up to 10 hens. In early spring cock birds will call or “crow” for hens, attempting to vocally accumulate somewhat of a harem. Territories become established with courtship displays, and an occasional cockfight amongst competing roosters.

Nesting begins in April and may last thru September. The hen builds a nest in a grassy area, which may be a fencerow, roadside, hayfield, small grain field, cattail swale, or some “set-aside” agricultural land. A clutch may be up to 12 eggs and the incubation period is 24 days. If a hen’s initial nest attempt is destroyed, she commonly will restart the process, but the clutch size will be usually smaller.

The chicks are precocial, meaning that immediately after the hatch, the chicks will be led away from the nest by the hen to start the growing and learning process.

Food Habits

Pheasants are gallinaceous, and have crops and gizzards. Weed seeds, grain, and insects are important food. Young pheasants greatly benefit from high protein insects. As insects become scarce in the fall, the pheasant diet moves to seeds, which would include weeds and the grain of agricultural operations.

Population & Habitat

As with most other wildlife species, the amount and quality of *habitat* dictates the population level. Brutal winters and excessively wet nesting seasons take their toll, but most importantly the amount of available habitat is the prime factor affecting the overall population.

The pheasant range in Indiana is associated with prairie soils and glaciations. It has been difficult to exactly pin down reasons for this somewhat peculiar range, however if one wants to seek pheasant in Indiana, one would need to venture into the historic prairie region of west central Indiana, or the pothole region of the northern tier counties.



Tall grass is the most important habitat component for pheasant management.

Pheasants and their population levels are closely associated with idle grasslands associated with farming. Some woody vegetation is desirable particularly during the harsh winter months, but by and large desirable pheasant habitat can be summed up in two words, tall grass. The “set-aside” or inactive land of farms, grown basically to tall grass, is excellent pheasant habitat. Pheasant also frequents cattail swales and small grain fields, which somewhat mimic tall grass. Clean farming techniques such as fall plowing with little to no odd areas, no brushy fencerows, and frequent mowing provides no habitat and usually no pheasants.

A combination of grain fields amongst areas of tall grass, with perhaps a brushy fencerow or two, would be deemed excellent pheasant habitat and would likely support an excellent pheasant population.

Enemies

Blizzards and brutally cold winters take their toll on pheasants. Excessive rains during the nesting season hampers reproduction. Coyotes and great horned owls commonly predate on pheasant. Skunks, raccoons, and opossums will destroy nests. However it is man and his land management techniques that is the biggest enemy. Clean farming which provides no habitat or waste grain is very detrimental. The mower is a very important enemy of the pheasant, providing for no tall grass, and commonly destroying nests and birds unable to avoid its wrath.



Winter weather can be an enemy, reducing the quality and quantity of habitat.

Beneficial Management Practices

Establishing and maintaining the major habitat component of tall grass is essential for good pheasant numbers. Nesting and brood rearing basically requires this habitat. Some grass species are better than others. “Bunch” grasses such as the warm-season species of switchgrass, bluestem, or indiangrass are very productive. Timothy is a good cool-season grass for pheasant. Bunch grasses allow both young and old pheasants to walk easily at ground level, without the need to climb matted clumps of vegetation, which form with many other grass species. Tall bunch grass also serves as a canopy of protection from avian predators. A landowner may need to consider altering the prevalent grass species on his property, from the undesirables such as tall fescue and reed canarygrass, to wildlife friendly grasses such as switchgrass, little bluestem, and timothy.

The maintenance or establishment of some hardy winter cover is also important. This may be an old remnant fencerow or thicket, or a nicely groomed evergreen windbreak. Wetlands with cattails also serve this purpose and are great wintering areas for pheasant.

Although undesirable in much of today’s farming methodology, annual weeds such as ragweed or foxtail are great pheasant habitat. The high protein seeds, along with the vegetative cover itself, are great for pheasant survival. Row crops such as corn or beans should not be fall plowed. The waste grain left in the field undisturbed throughout the winter is an important food source. Many landowners who manage for pheasants will plant “food plots” of grain sorghum or corn purposely for wintering pheasants.

Wheat is an excellent grain for pheasant management. During the spring growth stages, it is a good nesting area as it grows very similar to many grasses. After the grain harvest the remaining stubble is excellent brood rearing cover. If left undisturbed in fall and winter, it is excellent escape and roosting cover.



Excellent pheasant habitat, including tall grassland, grain stubble, and fencerows.

Photo Courtesy of Pheasants Forever

Maintaining your grasslands throughout the years is also an important management job. If a hands-off attitude is used, grasslands commonly undergo plant succession, woody vegetation and trees become prevalent, and over a period of time you lose your most important pheasant habitat components. Consider efforts to maintain grassland, such as fire (prescribed burning) or strip disking. Also refrain from conducting management activities during the peak of nesting season, April 1 through August 1.



Prescribed burning of grassland to maintain the habitat value.



Quality stand of prairie grass, including big blue and indiangrass

Landowners interested in developing or maintaining pheasant habitat he should consider contacting his DNR District Wildlife Biologist, and also inquire into existing Farm Bill programs. Commonly there are beneficial programs in place to offset the cost of habitat establishment and maintenance.

Hunting

The largest Hoosier harvest of pheasant took place in the 1960's, when there were massive government farm "set-aside" programs, which resulted in a large amount of habitat. During this time period, over 100,000 pheasants were harvested annually. Since that era, Indiana's annual pheasant harvest has hovered around 25,000. The decline is due to changes in available pheasant habitat, cleaner farming practices and man's encroachment into rural areas with concrete and housing developments.

Hunting is limited to cocks only, taking advantage of the easily distinguishable sexes and the polygamous nature of the bird. Many pheasant hunters utilize seasoned bird dogs to assist in locating birds and retrieving pheasants for the table.



Photo courtesy of Pheasants Forever

Related *Habitat Management Fact Sheets*:

Fescue Eradication
Strip Disking
Natural Revegetation
Cool Season Grass Establishment
Prescribed Burning

Warm Season Grass Establishment
Wetland Restoration
Grain Food Plots
Legume Food Plots
Wildflowers

Prepared by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife. For up-to-date information concerning the Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife, or for information on the location of your District Wildlife Biologist, visit our website at www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/huntguide1/wbiolo.htm

September 2006